

On Wanting the Moon: Avant-garde Women and Ambition

By Ruth Hemus



What do you want most?

I hope for a new personality that doesn't want the moon.¹

One of the Surrealists' favourite games, the 'Surrealist Inquiry', consisted of putting a short question, or series of questions, to different artists and writers. Their responses were then gathered and printed in surrealist magazines. If the questions appeared relatively simple, they were nevertheless pithy and pertinent. The replies, meanwhile, were at turns baffling, banal, bizarre, and beautiful.

The question and answer above were printed in *Savoir vivre*, a one-off Belgian surrealist magazine, edited by René Magritte, which appeared in 1946. There were four questions, and four respondents. This particular respondent was an English artist and writer, Emmy Bridgwater, who became involved in Surrealism from around 1940 and who took part in the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris in 1947.

This one small quotation, its appearance in print, and its background, represents and reveals many characteristics of the avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth-century: its desire to ask profound questions, its international nature, its interest in working collaboratively, its mix of artists and writers, and – last but by no means least – the presence and participation of women on the European cultural scene.

The essence of the response also hints at the 'double-edged' experience of being an avant-garde, creative woman. In voicing a fervent desire 'for a new personality that doesn't want the moon', Bridgwater appears to simultaneously draw attention to her intense ambition, and to express reservations about it. She is evidently a seeker. But does she aim too high? And want too much? Does this curiosity and desire in fact represent a burden for her, especially as a woman?

While such statements should not be taken too literally – creative women were at play, after all, with words, objects, brushes and paint, just as were men – they nevertheless can resonate in untold ways with the reader. Bridgwater's statement 'I hope for a new personality that doesn't want the moon' quietly hints at the potential, pressures and pitfalls of ambition that tested creative, pioneering women in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Ambiguity, multiplicity, openness and spontaneity: these were some of the watchwords of the cultural avant-garde mo-

Dr. Ruth Hemus is a lecturer at the University of London's Royal Holloway College and the author of Dada's Women. Hemus researches European avant-garde movements with the focus on women artists and writers.

Claude Cahun
Autoportrait, 1933
Self Portrait

vements that sprang up in Europe during the First World War, and which reached their peak in the 1920s and 1930s. The possibilities in foment must have been appealing and exciting to a generation of artists and writers – men and women – keen to find new ways to express themselves in a world that was changing in a myriad of ways, and at an unforeseen and heady pace.

What do you want most?
To live peacefully in a marvelous place.
(Ithell Colquhoun, artist and writer)

The Great War of 1914 to 1918 of course made a huge impact on the European landscape, both literally and figuratively. The Dada movement came about as a result of a gathering of exiles in neutral Zurich from 1916 onwards, and subsequently exported its ideas to Berlin, Paris, New York and beyond. It opposed war-mongering and sought to rescue language from its reduction to a propaganda tool. Italian Futurism, on the contrary, founded in 1909, glorified the violence of war and machinery. Postwar, its artists and writers were fuelled by the adrenaline of change promised by Mussolini's fascism. Constructivism, from 1919, with its roots in the East, had its own impetus and background: revolution, and art for social change. Later, in the 1930s, leading surrealists would foster alliances, for a period of time, with Communism. Politics and art were intertwined.

New ideas in psychology, physics and politics were turning long-held principles on their head. Nietzsche declared that God was dead. Einstein expounded the theory of relativity. Freud examined the unconscious. Meanwhile, new technologies abounded: in communications, transport and the workplace. Speed characterised all these developments. As for art: photography, and then film, threatened to take over the role of painting, their mimetic possibilities threatening painters with redundancy. Some artists reacted by rejecting photography outright; many in the avant-garde had a more nuanced dialogue with it. The Dadaists took scraps of photographs and magazines and made them the stuff of their artworks. Photomontage was offered up as an alternative to academicism: cutting and pasting photofragments replaced the one-point perspective and fustiness of oils. The Futurists, meanwhile, rendered the speed of the photograph in their dynamic images. The Dadaists, and then the Surrealists, made the camera play new tricks. Many asked:



Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Eléments de tension,
1917
Elements of Tension

Sonia Delaunay
Untitled, 1938



if photography could imitate external reality, why not use the surface of the canvas to conjure inner worlds?

The avant-garde's resistance to rules, its rejection of academicism, its plumbing of new realities, its celebration of the everyday – these principles could be said to appeal enormously to women, for whom socio-cultural and aesthetic norms had been especially limiting in the previous century. If the great academies still proved difficult to enter, arts and crafts colleges offered a more accessible alternative to a creative working life. On a pragmatic note, the *modus operandus* of small avant-garde groups offered welcome opportunities to push the boundaries of the arts. If apparently exclusive galleries were impenetrable to many women, small exhibitions, especially shared exhibitions, organised rapidly and spontaneously, offered gripping possibilities. If large, distinguished presses were resistant to publish new writing and photographic images, pamphlets, journals and periodicals offered fast means of dispersal. Access to avant-garde groups meant vital contact with other artists, male and female, with whom to exchange theories, test ideas, and give and receive feedback. Manifestos, soirées and performances, which were at the heart of avant-garde activity, offered to reach new audiences. All these activities stoked the interest of, and facilitated access to, publishers, gallery owners, and collectors. Crucially, especially for those individuals who were not so adept at self-promotion, they rested on principles of collaboration.

What do you want most?

All that helps me to protect my spirits
and to protect my madness in a sane world.

(Edith Rimmington, painter, photographer and writer)

In some areas, however, in spite of enormous promise and progress in thinking, change was slow. While questions of suffrage, family and domestic life, work and wages, were being debated in nation states throughout postwar Europe, and while in some cases women's suffrage was achieved, progress was far from uniform. The economic depression of the 1930s did little to help the situation. Then, as now, women bore the brunt of the financial downturn. In France, the new woman in search of economic, political, cultural and sexual liberation, built up by the media in the 1920s, was subsequently frowned upon, by the same commentators, for her decadence. Pro-natal campaigns were



Florence Henri
Portrait. Composition.
Cora, c. 1930

aggressively pursued. Paris may have been the celebrated hub of European cultural life, including for the avant-garde, but French women did not get the vote until 1944, after yet more madness in the apparently 'sane' world had led to another heavy war. The mismatch between aspirations and reality, pronouncements and progress, is evident. It was simply just harder for a woman to set up stall as an avant-garde artist or writer than it was for a man. How, for example, should a woman square an avant-garde creative life with a respectable family life?

Not only mainstream life, but even life on the edge, was to some extent resistant to the utopian ideals of the avant-garde. Many proponents of the avant-garde, too, were subject to the blind spots or prejudices of their time. More often than not, access to avant-garde groups was established via husbands, lovers, or brothers. Some liaisons were more egalitarian than others. Some groups were more enlightened than others. The now infamously radical movements of the European Avant-Garde – including Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, Expressionism and Futurism – were predominantly male, and have largely been understood and remembered via the productions of their male protagonists. This can in part be put down to the writing of art history, but is in part attributable to key figures at the time, whose zeal to commemorate their own part in the cultural revolution often obliterated any eagerness to acknowledge others', especially less visible, less vocal colleagues. In this respect we might note, for example, Raoul Hausmann's treatment of Hannah Höch in his memoirs. His lover for a period of time – he was married, and she would go on to have a lesbian relationship with Til Brugman – he denied her a place in the Dada Club and downplayed her contributions to photomontage.²

Nevertheless, caveats aside, the avant-garde was the best bet yet. Group networks were invaluable, not least on an avant-garde stage that was increasingly fuelled by international exchange. Paris, above all, was a draw. Individuals, women included, travelled there to visit, exhibit, and sometimes live for considerable periods of time. And possibilities opened up, as time went on. Where women's work was scarcely admitted to surrealist exhibitions in the 1920s, for example, in the years 1930 to 1939 at least fifty-three women took part in international surrealist exhibitions.³ Avant-garde groups provided hubs of thinking, action and production. They set out and tested ideas and concepts, including in manifestos, pamphlets, and soirées. Although they



Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Coquilles et fleurs,
1938
Shell and Flowers



Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Construction
géométrique, 1942
Geometrical
Construction

engaged in forceful agendas, they were nonetheless fluent, fluid, fluctuating. Language and nationalities mixed. Names and allegiances changed. The women in this exhibition attached themselves to groups, separated from them, took from them, gave to them, and made the –ism their own.

These women did not have the benefit of the feminist politics, philosophy and activism developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, with that period's significant strides in legal, social and suffrage systems. We search in vain for an organised network of women artists fuelled by feminism and sisterhood. Informally, however, working and personal relationships were established between women. They wrote letters, attended meetings, participated in exhibitions, travelled, started journals, exchanged work, and took part in performances. They needed and riled and cajoled. Though the power remained largely in the hands of men, the number of individual women at work within the avant-garde is astonishing.

On close inspection, it becomes apparent that women were present and proactive within every realm of the avant-garde – in every artistic discipline, and across geographies. Their names are abundantly inscribed within journals, exhibition catalogues, and performance schedules. These sources offer indelible traces of pioneering women, even as their names have at times been little acknowledged in written histories.⁴ Women painted, danced, wrote, sketched, drew, photographed, filmed, theorised, sculpted, sang, and shouted in every capital city of the avant-garde. They made their literal mark and they made their figurative mark.

What do you want most?
What I want most is 'sunshine tonight'.
(Irène Hamoir, writer)

Hamoir wanted sunshine in the evening. Colquhoun wanted peace. Rimmington wanted to retain her spirit in the face of rationalism. Bridgwater wanted to not want too much, perhaps fearing the strength of her desires. No doubt they all wanted much more besides. For this exhibition, 'Women Artists of the Avant-garde 1920-1940', the curators have selected the indelible work of eight women artists. What drove these individuals not only to produce but to pioneer? What did they want most? In an essay that is a creative tour de force, Mary Ann Caws



Hannah Höch
Traumnacht, 1943-46
Dream Night

pleaded for surrealist women ‘Give them their voice: they had one.’⁵ At the risk of ventriloquising, but bereft of the opportunity to pose the question directly, this essay calls up some of the words of this exhibition’s stars, as if in part response.

What do you want most?

While waiting for clarity of sight, I want to
track myself down, to wrestle. (...) I want to sew, to sting,
to kill, and only with the sharpest point. (...)
To sail ahead only in the direction of my own prow.⁶
Claude Cahun, 1930

What I want above all in photography is to compose
the image as I do with paintings. It is necessary that the
volumes, lines, the shadows and light obey my will
and say what I want them to say.⁷
Florence Henri, 1927

I ardently want to abolish the qualifier “director”.
The artist who composes and gives rhythm to the image, the
verb of the film, on a given theme, is not a simple arranger of
movements. He sees, he feels, he expresses, he creates
sensitive thought, he is the visualizer of the oeuvre.⁸
Germaine Dulac, 1922

Cahun’s reference to sewing reminds us of a long tradition of women’s creative work, even as she chooses photography as a medium. Her physical, even violent metaphors suggest the often painful nature of examining one’s own identity. Henri, too, embraces a new medium. Grappling with ways of making it express her ideas, she considers its technical and aesthetic qualities, seeking to make it her own. Dulac’s words, like Henri’s, draw attention to the relationship between artist and medium, and question accepted terms and ideas. A pioneer in film, she sees, she feels, she expresses, she creates sensitive thought, she is the visualiser of the oeuvre.

What do you want most?

I’d like to blur the fixed boundaries that we humans,
in our self-certainty, tend to draw around everything within our

reach. I want to show that small can also be large
and that large is also small; it's only the standpoint from
which we judge things that must change.
I'd like to show the world through the eyes of an ant today,
and tomorrow the way the moon maybe sees it.⁹
Hannah Höch, 1929

I increasingly believe that the desire to create
beautiful things, when it is authentic and sincere,
coincides with the aspiration to perfection.¹⁰
Sophie Taeuber-Arp, 1922

Sculpture is the shaping of space. If we want to know the
real tendency in the development of sculpture,
we must compare the highest recent achievements.
We must not care about what the majority of
minor sculptors are doing, but consider only
the achievements of those who clear the road.¹¹
Katarzyna Kobro, 1929

Höch, a rare female presence in Berlin Dada, who broke new ground with her photomontage work, expresses her desire to challenge conventional ways of thinking about and representing the world. Taeuber's statement forms part of her reflection on the role of art and craft, ornament and function, which she explored in an extraordinary range of activities, including dancing, painting, sewing, tapestry, puppet-making, and interior design. Meanwhile, Kobro's interrogation of sculpture reveals huge ambition for her chosen medium of expression, and puts emphasis on innovation over imitation.

What do you want most?

I have led three lives: one for Robert [Delauney],
one for my son and grandson, a shorter one for myself.
I don't regret not having given myself more attention.
I really did not have the time.¹²
Sonia Delaunay, 1979

Picasso, I want my face back. The unbroken geography of it.
Dora Maar, (Grace Nichols)¹³

The two (later) quotations above deliberately bring in the personal. If women's work is too often confined by critics to the intimate, individual and domestic, it remains nonetheless the case that, for women especially, expectations and demands around personal relationships, home and family have an impact on creative work. Sonia Delauney's words acknowledge both the difficulties and positive pleasures in a lifetime of balancing family and professional life. In spite of a lack of time, she was a prolific painter, and her shaping of Orphism and colour theory are undeniable. Maar's words are deliberately ventriloquised, here, in an act of creative imagination by the poet Grace Nichols, who, in a poem 'Weeping Woman', ponders what it must have been like to be the muse – fragmented and deconstructed for posterity. That status, of muse-mistress, vies uneasily with her existence and reputation as an artist. Like so many other 'muses', Maar was engaged in her own creative processes, as a painter and a photographer.

The quotations researched and reproduced here are of course just fragments, chosen by this author from countless other words and statements, quite apart from the question of what remained unspoken. They are as diverse as the eight women who uttered them, whose work has been gathered by the curators for this exhibition. In many ways their works can be said to respond to that selfsame enquiry, What do you want most? In fact, they respond to it far more faithfully, since each woman, even if also a writer, theorist or interviewee, above all expressed herself and the world around her through visual media. Diverse in method, innovations and effects, the artists in this exhibition nevertheless had in common the will to express, to make new, to break new ground. Giving the lie to the notion that women were followers not leaders, the language they used, and theories behind them, are forward-thinking and complex.

At one stage, the curators, considered calling this exhibition, 'The Other Side of the Moon'. That notion was thought-provoking for two reasons. Firstly, it expressed the idea of seeking out those artists that we, as visitors, viewers, and readers, do not normally see. Secondly, it highlighted a driving force behind these women's creative work, which was to go beyond the external, superficial, and conscious, to the internal, core, and unconscious. These artists wanted to make seen the unseen, and represent the unrepresented, or even unrepresentable. They wanted to find ways of seeing the other side of the



Florence Henri
Untitled (Mirror
Composition), 1933

Florence Henri
Composition. Nature
morte, c. 1933
Composition. Still Life

¹ The full list of enquiries and responses, in English translation, are printed in Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998, pp. 212-3.

² For fuller discussion, see: Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women*. London & New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 91-6.

³ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴ Scholars and curators, many drawing on feminist cultural theories and activism from the 1970s onwards, have been instrumental in addressing and redressing this neglect.

⁵ 'Seeing the Surrealist Woman: We are a Problem.' Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991, p. 12.

⁶ Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, p. 53. From: 'Aventure Invisible' ('The Invisible Adventure'), preface to *Aveux non avenues*.

⁷ George Eastman House, *1000 Photo Icons*. Cologne, London: Taschen, 2003, p. 530.

⁸ Prosper Hillairet, ed., *Germaine Dulac. Écrits sur le cinéma. (1919-1937)*. Éditions Paris experimental: 1994, p. 26. From: 'La création d'un vocabulaire cinématographique.' *L'Écho de Paris*, 15 April 1922.

⁹ 2008 Förderverein Künstlerhaus Hannah Höch. http://www.hannah-hoech-haus-ev.de/index.php?id=hannah_hoech. Viewed 15th December 2011.

¹⁰ *Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Rythmes plastiques, réalités architecturales*. Clamart: Fondation Arp, 2007, p. 23. From: 'Bemerkungen über den Unterricht in Ornamentalen Entwerfen. Bulletin de l'Union Suisse des maîtresses professionnelles et ménagères / Korrespondenzblatt des Schweiz, Vereins der Gewerbe- und Hauswirtschaftslehrerinnen', Zurich, no. 11/12, 31 December 1922.

¹¹ *Constructivism in Poland 1923 to 1936*. exh. cat., Cambridge: Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1984, p. 37. From: 'Sculpture and Solid.' Europa, No. 2, Warszawa 1929, p. 60. Part of Kobra's response to a Europa questionnaire (1. What is your opinion about the state of modern art? 2. What direction of endeavours and searches in modern art do you find as the most expedient and productive?).

¹² Uta Grosenick, ed., *Women Artists: Femmes Artistes du Xe et du XXle Siècle*. Cologne: Taschen, 2005, p. 54.

¹³ 'Weeping Woman.' Grace Nichols, *Picasso, I Want My Face Back*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2009.

moon, the side that is not visible to the eye, but which stalks the curious mind.

The twenty-first century has brought its own enormous shifts in possibilities. Networking, interventions, productions and exhibitions have been enabled by new technologies. But freedom brings its own restraints, and the desires of so-called free, liberated and empowered individuals are frequently channelled into superficial, consumerist desires. The same question remains compelling, both for the artist and the citizen, then, as now: What do you want most?